



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Mr. Gela Bezhuashvili, Foreign Minister of Georgia

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 9, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Minister, the United States warmly welcomes you to the Permanent Council. These are times of great challenge and even greater opportunity for Georgia and her neighbors, allies and friends.

The United States reiterates its firm support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, including the peaceful resolution of the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within Georgia. We are encouraged by the Minister's report of ongoing democratic and market reforms in his country, notably including progress on ensuring religious freedom and transparency in government.

The Ljubljana Ministerial adopted a positive Statement on Georgia that gave us reason to hope for new movement on resolving the South Ossetia problem. The OSCE welcomed Georgia's Peace Plan and recognized it as a basis for future settlement of the conflict. The plan subsequently proposed by Mr. Kokoity is so similar that we believe there is a good basis for agreement and prompt implementation.

However, the meeting of the Joint Control Commission in Moscow on December 27 was a disappointment. By all accounts, it did not advance the process. We sincerely hope that the next JCC meeting will bring more tangible results. We call on all the parties, most notably the South Ossetians, to demonstrate the political will needed to bring this conflict to a peaceful resolution.

The United States believes that broader participation of OSCE members will facilitate the negotiation process. We are ready and willing to lend our support.

We encourage the Georgian government to continue its efforts to advance the peace process by taking such steps as passage of the Law on Restitution. Moreover, we call on all sides to abide by existing agreements and carry out demilitarization of the zone of conflict immediately. The United States calls on all concerned to avoid the harsh language that has recently blemished the debate and asks them, instead, to adopt more measured tones that can lead to real dialogue.

The United States urges the sovereign Parliament of Georgia to proceed with caution as it considers how to address the question of the effectiveness of the Joint Peace Keeping Force. We agree, and OSCE reports verify, that the JPKF could be more effective. Still, a request for the peacekeepers to leave without anything in their place may be destabilizing. In this regard, we call on Georgia to contribute its full complement of forces to maintain the proper balance

within the JPKF. This should be done in strict coordination with existing mechanisms, in full transparency, and in accordance with previous agreements.

When I was in Tbilisi in mid-January, there were very serious disruptions to the supply of gas and electricity. I witnessed first-hand how the Government of Georgia ameliorated and resolved that humanitarian crisis and how the People of Georgia supported their government. It was very encouraging to see how quickly Azerbaijan responded and how other OSCE participating States cooperated by coming to Georgia's assistance. We are gratified that Russia completed repairs to the pipelines and electricity lines amidst adverse conditions. The United States supports Georgia's vision of an energy future that includes diversified sources and routes for energy.

We see one bright spot of cooperation on South Ossetia. It is the ongoing Needs Assessment Study, for which my country is the major contributor and in which all the sides are cooperating in a professional manner. We believe that the promise of new prosperity would open vistas of an attractive future in Georgia for all Georgians and Ossetians. The United States is already preparing to support the projects that the Study will identify and we call on all participating States to help with this approach.

In conclusion, Mr. Minister, we understand completely that this is a difficult time for Georgia. The United States will continue in its firm and strong support for your efforts to foster peace and stability at home and in the region.

Thank you.